

# The Myth of the Iron Lady

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If you consult the online encyclopedia [Wikipedia](#), which is democratically created by Internet users, you will see a pattern emerge in the phrases used to describe the first female leaders of many countries.

[England's Margaret Thatcher](#), you will learn, was called "Attila the Hen." Golda Meir, [Israel's](#) first female prime minister, was "the only man in the Cabinet." [Richard Nixon](#) called Indira Gandhi, [India's](#) first female prime minister, "the old witch." And [Angela Merkel](#), the current chancellor of [Germany](#), has been dubbed "The Iron Frau."

The conventional explanation for why female leaders are widely perceived as mannish, conniving and ruthless -- not just by men but by other women, too -- is that politics is tough, and the only way for a woman to survive in a male-dominated field is to have sharp elbows.

In recent years, however, a host of cleverly designed psychological experiments have shown that a subtler dynamic is at play -- a motif now on display in the United States as [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) (D-N.Y.) tries to become the United States' first female president.

The driving factor in the way women leaders are perceived, experiments show, is not that they are any more ruthless than men who get to the top, but that people have strong and often unconscious conceptions about men, women and the nature of leadership.

"The roots are in stereotypes about women, men and leaders," said Alice Eagly, a social psychologist at [Northwestern University](#) and co-author of "Through the Labyrinth," a new book about the psychological dynamics of women and leadership. "Culturally, women are the nicer sex and men are more aggressive go-getters. Leaders are generically in our culture more like men than women in the way people think about leaders."

Experiments show that women vying for leadership roles are automatically assigned two labels. The first is to be seen as nice and warm, but incompetent; the second is to be seen as competent but unpleasant. Women stuck with Label A cannot be leaders, because the stereotype of leadership is incompatible with incompetence. Women who do become leaders get stuck with Label B, because if leadership is unconsciously associated with manliness, cognitive consistency requires that female leaders be stripped of the caring qualities normally associated with women.

"When people say Hillary has no heart or no sense of humor, they are saying she is not warm," said Susan Fiske, a social psychologist at [Princeton University](#). Countless

newspaper articles, for example, have asserted that Hillary Clinton falls short of [Bill Clinton's](#) legendary people skills. "People do not question her competence, but her trustworthiness and warmth."

The first hint that we might be perceiving women leaders as unpleasant even if they are not comes from Wikipedia itself. Before making the transition to leadership and Label B, members of the club of first female leaders often turn out to have been described with Label A. Before ascending to the chancellorship, Merkel was called "das Mädchen" -- "the girl" -- by her mentor, Helmut Kohl. Before Indira Gandhi became prime minister, her chief political rival dismissed her as a "gungi gudiya," or "dumb doll."

Did "das Mädchen" become "Iron Frau" and "dumb doll" become "old witch" because Merkel and Gandhi changed personalities, or because the mantle of leadership changed how they were seen?

While individuals of both sexes can be cold, pushy, conniving and manipulative, those terms get attached to female leaders for no better reason than that they happen to be female leaders, said [New York University](#) organizational psychologist Madeline Heilman: "Just knowing they are successful and competent causes people to infer they have engaged in all these behaviors and to disapprove of them."

In the simplest experimental demonstration of the phenomenon, Heilman recently asked a group of volunteers to evaluate two leaders, a man and a woman. She devised two descriptions of executives with roughly similar qualifications.

Without the volunteers' knowledge, Heilman regularly interchanged the names of the leaders in the descriptions. For each description, half the volunteers thought they were hearing about an executive named James, while the other half heard exactly the same description applied to an executive called Andrea.

The volunteers were asked two simple questions: to decide which leader seemed less likable, and whether they would prefer James or Andrea as a boss. Nearly three-quarters of the volunteers said they thought Andrea was less likable than James. More than four-fifths chose James as a boss. Women showed the same bias as men: Andrea seemed less likable merely because she was a female leader.

Heilman's finding, published earlier this year in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, replicates the conclusions of other studies. But in a twist that may well have a bearing on Clinton's campaign, Heilman proved that the reason people see a highly competent woman as less likable than a man with precisely the same qualifications is that such women are automatically perceived to have lost their feminine, caring side.

When Heilman added elements to her descriptions that showed James and Andrea were especially warm and caring people, the psychological bias disappeared entirely. Equal numbers of volunteers now said they would be happy to have either Andrea or James be their leader.

